

The Fascination Of Bonsai[©]

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INTRODUCTION

The word bonsai literally means a tree in a container. In Japanese, “bon” means a bowl or pot and “sai” to plant. For most people bonsai are simply miniatures of various kinds of trees in containers and the word is associated with small trees, but bonsai is much more than this. It is the perfection of a slice of nature using the tree as a central theme. A bonsai grower thus strives to capture nature in his creation (Fig. 1).

Looking at it, one should evoke the memory of, for example, a bushveld scene, a forest or poplar grove, a lonely tree on the plains, a tree with roots tumbling over a rock or clinging to a cliff face, or even a clump of trees at the seaside, all blown in the same direction (Figs. 2 and 3).

The Philosophy of Bonsai. To the layman and many Westerners, the Japanese “noh” performances and tea ceremonies are incomprehensible and a waste of time. For the uninformed bonsai would also fall into this category, but for the bonsai enthusiast practicing bonsai, it is a way of life that he/she would certainly not consider a waste of time.

Apart from the preparation of soil mixtures, the selection of plant material in nurseries and the collection of trees and stones in the wild, cultivating bonsai, also feeds the spirit.

The Japanese are fond of meditating in their bonsai gardens or before a century old tree which has been put on show in the tokonoma or traditional platform for displaying flower arrangements in just about every Japanese home. Therefore, one may be transported into your own world away from the hurry and scurry around you.

Is Bonsai an Art Form? Yes, bonsai is an art form and, with the related art of Ikebana, it represents one of the most important art forms in Japan.

Bonsai is a form of expression and, in the same way that ballet tells a story using movement, rhythm and music, bonsai illustrates a slice of nature but slowly, over the years, with the work of art never finally being completed actually it also represents movement (growth) but at a very slow pace, which cultivates patience on the part of the enthusiast (Fig. 4).

The Effect of Movement. Bonsai could also be compared to sculpture, but where the sculptor does not use dead stone or marble. Instead living plant cells are used, which grow and are formed in the course of time into an image of what is found in nature.

Naturally every grower has his/her own special interpretation of a tree or landscape and that version may differ substantially from fellow artists. This is how it should be, as long as nature is not represented artificially and the observer is caught up in the interpretation.

The more time the “sculptor” spends on his “sculpture”, by continually chopping away, carving, shaping, and using the pruning shears, the more pleasing and mature the final product becomes (Fig. 5).

With the passage of time the tree acquires character, the trunk thickens and the bark ages so that it takes on the appearance of a forest giant. In spite of its age

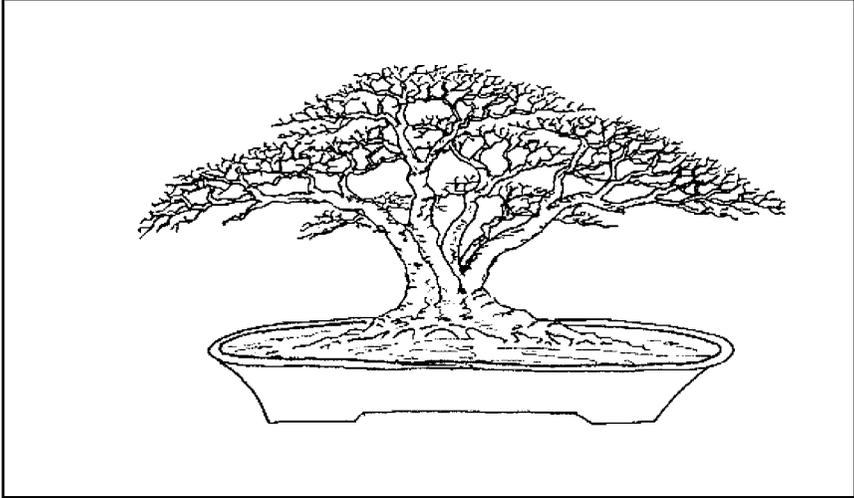


Figure 1. A bonsai grower thus strives to capture nature in his creation.

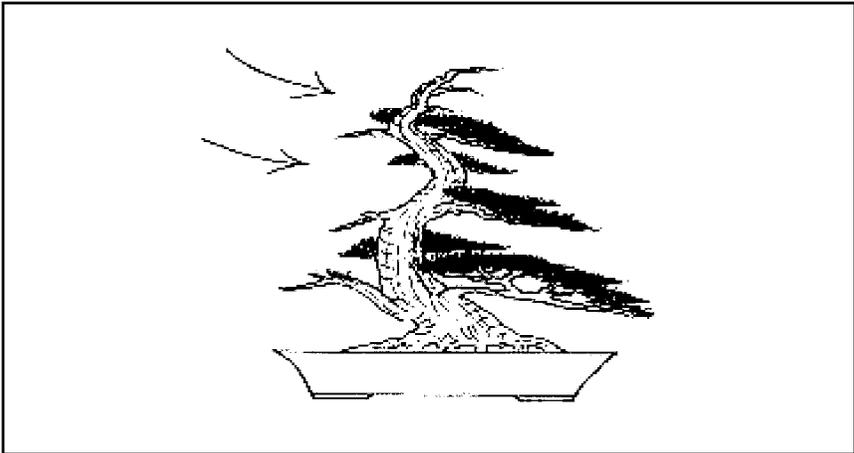


Figure 2. A tree at the seaside blown by the wind.

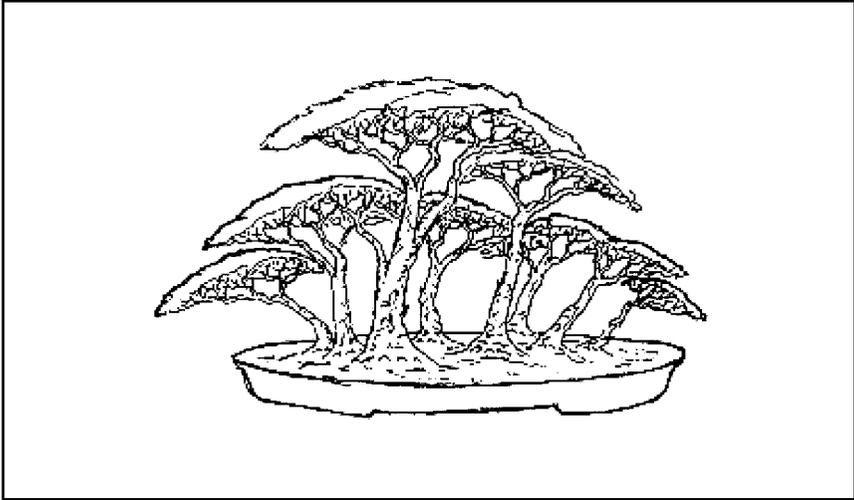


Figure 3. A bushveld scene.

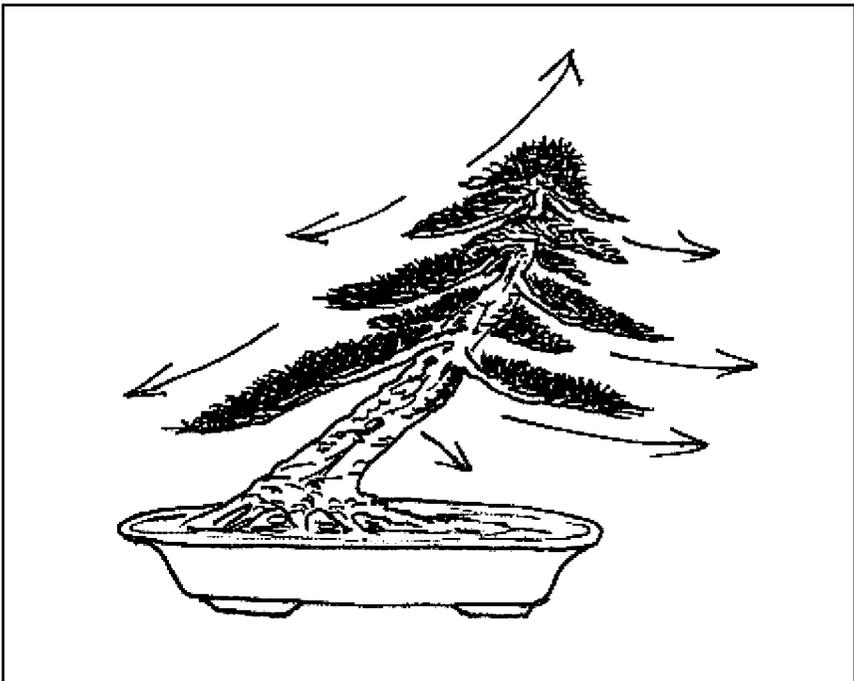


Figure 4. The effect of movement.

the outward appearance of the tree remains fresh and bright. This appearance is achieved through constant care by means of shoot and root pruning, the latter happening every 2 to 5 years. The pruning of old roots stimulates continual growth of new roots and in this way bonsai trees can achieve great age. Trees of 400, 500, or 600 years old are not uncommon. There is a famous bonsai tree in Japan that is 800 years old.

A bonsai grower should also have certain knowledge of the basic concepts of horticulture. The fact that bonsai are cultivated in optimal growing conditions explains why they live longer than trees in nature. A bonsai tree never experiences droughts, hail damage, veld fire or plagues of locusts since the slightest sign of pests or disease is diagnosed immediately and treated. A bonsai grower can surely be compared to a caring mother in respect of her newborn child.

BONSAI STYLES OF THE WORLD

There are more than 42 recognised bonsai styles in the world, which include five African styles, such as the Baobab-, Pierneef- or Umbrella-, Flap-top-, Wild Fig-, and Bushveld-, or natural-style trees.

As far back as 1980 at the first official Bonsai Convention in Cape Town, I delivered a speech on the theme "The winds of change to indigenous styles" to the bonsai public. At that stage I introduced the five African styles as mentioned above.

The Baobab and the Pierneef style depict the umbrella crowned acacias of Africa, which captured the imagination of the South African public. Today these styles are found in most collections in South Africa, Namibia, and even in Zimbabwe (Figs. 6 and 7).

PLANT SPECIES SUITABLE FOR GROWING BONSAI

We are fortunate in South Africa to have more than 1000 tree species to choose from in comparison to the limitation of not more than 100 tree species in the Northern Hemisphere.

We are, however, still in the experimentation phase with regard to most of our trees. The African have a saying that we are "only at the ears of the hippo", as there are still a vast number of trees to challenge the bonsai enthusiast.

Most of the general tree species such as *Acacia*, *Ficus*, *Olea*, *Buddleja*, *Combretum*, *Rhus*, *Podocarpus*, *Commiphora*, *Grewia*, *Celtis*, *Diospyros*, as well as other minor tree species have been researched. From these we learned by trial and error, which are the most suitable for bonsai purposes.

We have had wonderful results with leaf reduction as well as the reduction of internodes of the *Acacia* and other species. It is a privilege and an enriching opportunity to have the opportunity to work with the fascinating African plant species and to add to the list of popular indigenous trees suitable for bonsai.

THE ENJOYMENT OF BONSAI

The growing of bonsai provides a great deal of pleasure. To get a tree to grow in a particular style is a creative hobby that can keep one busy for years (Fig 8).

Space constraints means we are unable to have huge trees growing in our gardens. With Bonsai you can have as many as 50 different trees in your collection.

Even the changing seasons bring their charm: First the buds, followed by the prettiest spring blossoms after the cold winter has departed; then the climax of summer greenery; after that the warm autumn colours of the latter part of the year



Figure 5. The more time the “sculptor” spends on his “sculpture”, by shaping and using the pruning shears the more pleasing and mature the final product becomes.

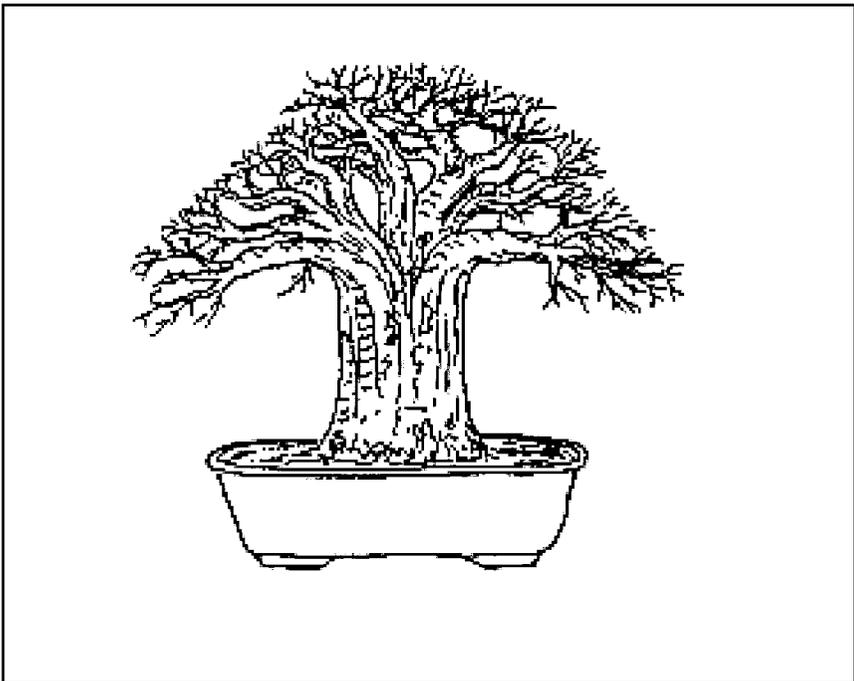


Figure 6. The Baobab style.

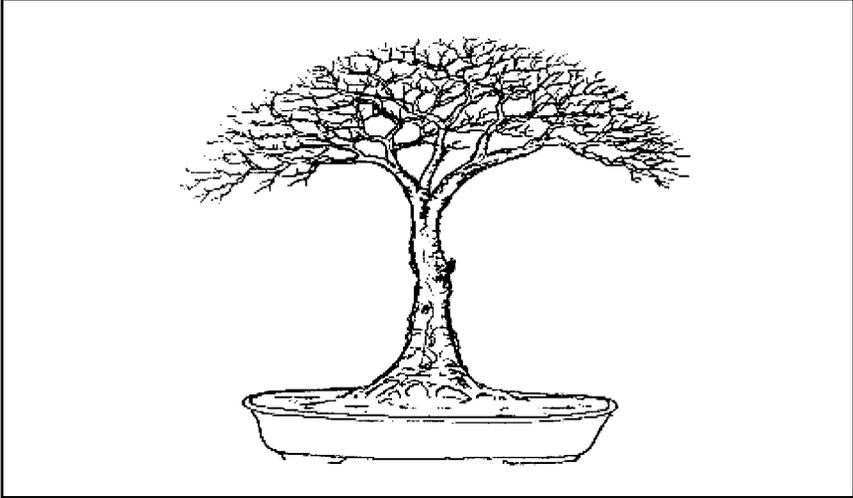


Figure 7. The Pierneef style.



Figure 8. A large tree growing as a bonsai.

before the leaves drop and the severity of winter is once again experienced with the promise of the coming spring which is eagerly anticipated.

Bonsai is particularly popular amongst professional people as they can indulge themselves after a hectic day at the office and find peace of mind amongst their trees by nipping, pruning, and reshaping to obtain the ultimate in their strive to perfection. Bonsai provides a marvellous therapy in today's hectic world.

Another enjoyable aspect of bonsai is the field trips where specimens are gathered. It is a wonderful hobby for the entire family and one has a splendid opportunity to learn so much about nature.